Great poets of the 20th century

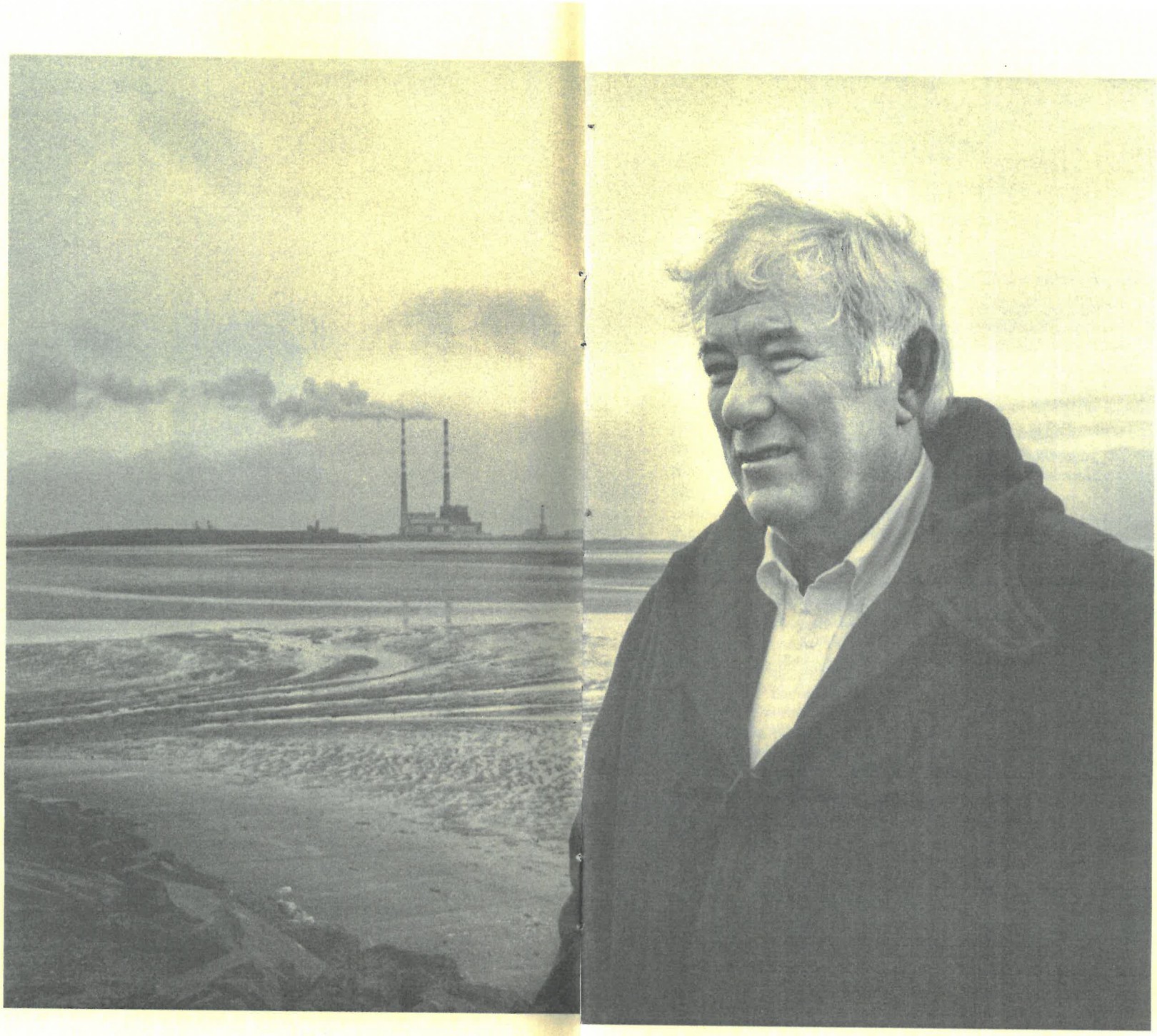
Seamus Heaney

Foreword by John Banville

No 6 in a series of 7

theguardian ff

Seamus Heaney



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(No 5 appears in the Observer)

Produced by the Guardian
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Foreword
John Banville

Few poets find a way into the inner ear of the multitude. Mere rhymesters can do it, bards of the birthday card, bluff wearers of the heart on the sleeve, but who would have imagined that an artist of Seamus Heaney's seriousness, range and subtlety would appeal so directly not only to the sternest tenders of the groves of academe, but also to the simplest hearts. From his first published volume, Death of a Naturalist, which opens with that most tender and determined of manifestos, Digging, Heaney has had a wide and more than enthusiastic following, for whom the awarding of the Nobel prize in 1995 was merely the international community's due recognition that here was one of the greats.

Heaney was born on a small farm in County Derry in 1939, "the eldest child of an ever-growing family". In his Nobel address in Stockholm he spoke lovingly of his childhood at Mossbawn – could his birthplace have had a more Heaneyesque name? In the three-roomed thatched farmhouse where, in their early years, he and his siblings – they are all there in A Sofa in the Forties, "kneeling / Behind each other, eldest down to youngest" – passed "a kind of den-life which was more or less emotionally and intellectually proofed against the outside world". That outside world, as we know, had entered upon one of its most murderous and cataclysmic phases, though "none of the news of these world-spasms entered me as terror ... and if there was something culpable about such political ignorance in that time and place, there was something positive about the security I inhabited as a result of it."

This unapologetic stance is characteristic of Heaney; if he insists on affirming the enduring decencies, what Wordsworth calls "the little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love", it is in the full acknowledgment of the savagery that man is capable of visiting upon man. Many of the poems he wrote in the 1970s and the 1980s, during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, are unflinching and often enraged threnodies for a terrible time.

After attending boarding school at St Columb's College in Derry

city as a scholarship boy – a transition, as he has said, "from the earth of farm labour to the heaven of education" – Heaney went on to study at Queen's University Belfast. Here he joined that extraordinary band of "Northern poets" that included Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, and later on Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson and Medbh McGuckian. At St Columb's he had been taught Latin and Irish, and now at Queen's he took up Anglo-Saxon. He has spoken of how the study of these ancient tongues helped him to find his own voice, with its earthy, guttural, consonantal music. Another pivotal discovery was PV Glob's book The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved, published in English in 1969, the year the latest round of tribal violence was getting under way in Northern Ireland. Heaney's aesthetic direction had always been northwards, and now in Glob's description of the corpses of what appear to be sacrificial victims preserved by bog acids, he found an emblematic mode of speaking of atrocities nearer to home and to his time. In The Tollund Man he dreams of travelling to Jutland, where, "In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home."

In the mid-1970s he moved south with his wife Marie – the constant subject of Heaney's passionate, tender and rueful love poems – and their children, first to a cottage in County Wicklow, and later to Dublin. In the 1980s he was appointed to a professorship at Harvard University, a part-time post which allowed him to live and work for most of the year at home in Ireland.

Dublin and Harvard brought a noticeable shift in his work, somewhat away from the blood-boltered northern fastnesses to a more southerly aspect. His veneration for Dante became more evident, and he made translations from the Divina Comedia and also from Virgil and Sophocles.

Heaney's commitment to life beyond the study door is unusual for a poet, and all the more admirable for that. What he would have us hearken to most closely is not the song the verse-maker spins inside his own head, but the common world's melody, "the music of what happens", as he writes in the poem Song. At the close of his Nobel address he spoke of "poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit": "the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being."

Seamus Heaney

Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Death of a Naturalist

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,
But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied
Specks to range on window-sills at home,
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until
The fattening dots burst into nimble-
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass and angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some
hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

Anahorish

My 'place of clear water',
the first hill in the world
where springs washed into
the shiny grass

and darkened cobbles
in the bed of the lane.
Anahorish, soft gradient
of consonant, vowel-meadow,

after-image of lamps
swung through the yards
on winter evenings.
With pails and barrows

those mound-dwellers
go waist-deep in mist
to break the light ice
at wells and dunghills.

The Tollund Man

I

Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country near by
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.

II

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

III

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grabaulle, Nebelgard,
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

The Toome Road

One morning early I met armoured cars
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.
How long were they approaching down my roads
As if they owned them? The whole country was
    sleeping.
I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
Of outhouse roofs. Whom should I run to tell
Among all of those with their back doors on the latch
For the bringer of bad news, that small-hours visitant
Who, by being expected, might be kept distant?
Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones ...
O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

The Railway Children

When we climbed the slopes of the cutting
We were eye-level with the white cups
Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires.

Like lovely freehand they curved for miles
East and miles west beyond us, sagging
Under their burden of swallows.

We were small and thought we knew nothing
Worth knowing. We thought words travelled the wires
In the shiny pouches of raindrops,

Each one seeded full with the light
Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves
So infinitesimally scaled

We could stream through the eye of a needle.

Terminus

I

When I hoked there, I would find
An acorn and a rusted bolt.

If I lifted my eyes, a factory chimney
And a dormant mountain.

If I listened, an engine shunting
And a trotting horse.

Is it any wonder when I thought
I would have second thoughts?

II

When they spoke of the prudent squirrel's hoard
It shone like gifts at a nativity.

When they spoke of the mammon of iniquity
The coins in my pockets reddened like stove-lids.

I was the march drain and the march drain's banks
Suffering the limit of each claim.

III

Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between.

My left hand placed the standard iron weight.
My right tilted a last grain in the balance.

Baronies, parishes met where I was born.
When I stood on the central stepping stone

I was the last earl on horseback in midstream
Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.

Clearances

3

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

The Pitchfork

Of all implements, the pitchfork was the one
That came near to an imagined perfection:
When he tightened his raised hand and aimed with it,
It felt like a javelin, accurate and light.

So whether he played the warrior or the athlete
Or worked in earnest in the chaff and sweat,
He loved its grain of tapering, dark-flecked ash
Grown satiny from its own natural polish.

Riveted steel, turned timber, burnish, grain,
Smoothness, straightness, roundness, length and sheen.
Sweat cured, sharpened, balanced, tested, fitted.
The springiness, the clip and dart of it.

And then when he thought of probes that reached the
farthest,
He would see the shaft of a pitchfork sailing past
Evenly, imperturbably through space,
Its prongs starlit and absolutely soundless –

But has learned at last to follow that simple lead
Past its own aim, out to an other side
Where perfection – or nearness to it – is imagined
Not in the aiming but the opening hand.

Markings

I

We marked the pitch: four jackets for four goalposts,
That was all. The corners and the squares
Were there like longitude and latitude
Under the bumpy thistly ground, to be
Agreed about or disagreed about
When the time came. And then we picked the teams
And crossed the line our called names drew between
us.

Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field
As the light died and they kept on playing
Because by then they were playing in their heads
And the actual kicked ball came to them
Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard
Breathing in the dark and skids on grass
Sounded like effort in another world ...
It was quick and constant, a game that never need
Be played out. Some limit had been passed,
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness
In time that was extra, unforeseen and free.

II

You also loved lines pegged out in the garden,
The spade nicking the first straight edge along
The tight white string. Or string stretched perfectly
To mark the outline of a house foundation,
Pale timber battens set at right angles
For every corner, each freshly sawn new board
Spick and span in the oddly passive grass.
Or the imaginary line straight down
A field of grazing, to be ploughed open
From the rod stuck in one headrig to the rod
Stuck in the other.

III

All these things entered you
As if they were both the door and what came through it.
They marked the spot, marked time and held it open.
A mower parted the bronze sea of corn.
A windlass hauled the centre out of water.
Two men with a cross-cut kept it swimming
Into a felled beech backwards and forwards
So that they seemed to row the steady earth.

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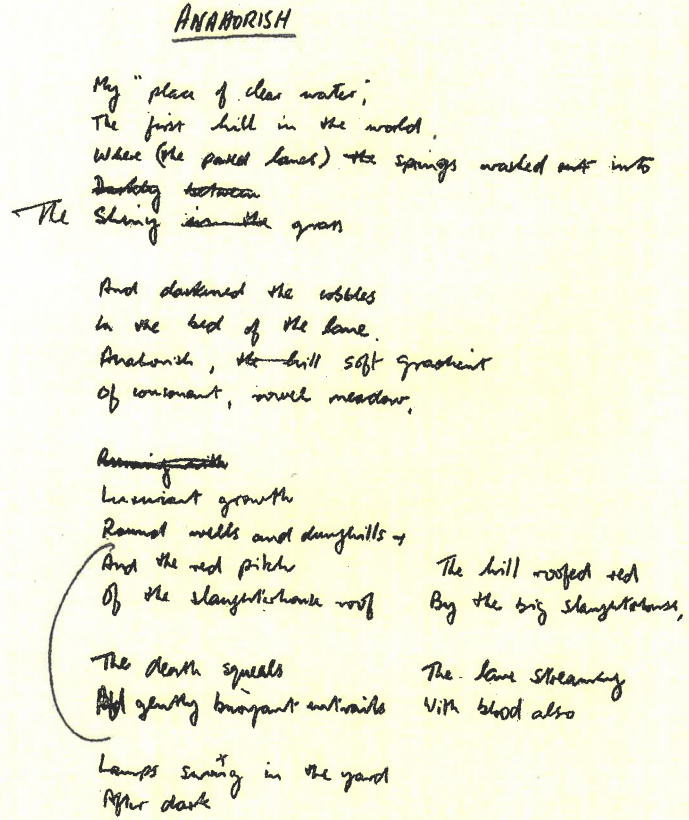

ANAHORISH

My "place of clear water",
The first hill in the world.
Where (the paved lanes) the springs washed out into
Darkly between
The Shiny in the grass

And darkened the cobbles
In the bed of the lane.
Anahorish, the hill soft gradient
Of consonant, vowel meadow.

Luminant growth
Round wells and dunghills
And the red pitch
Of the slaughterhouse roof

The hill roofed red
By the big slaughterhouse,

The death squeals
Of gently transparent entrails

The lane streaming
With blood also

Lamps swung in the yard
After dark

Facsimile manuscript of Anahorish from Wintering Out, 1972

From the Guardian and Observer archives

Waiting for Ginsberg
By Mary Kenny
August 26 1965

Yeats has crushed every Irish poet except Paddy Kavanagh. What is more, they have all listened to his pernicious advice about learning their trade, and worse, about being the indomitable Irishry. Take Seamus Heaney, for instance, a Belfast schoolteacher who is 26:

Lady with the frilled blouse
And simple tartan skirt
Since you have left the house
Its emptiness has hurt
All thought. In your presence
Time rode easy, anchored
On a smile; but absence
Rocked love's balance, unmoored
The days. They buck and bound
Across the calendar,
Pitched from the quiet sound
Of your flower-tender
Voice. Need breaks on my strand;
You've gone, I am at sea.
Until you resume command
Self is in mutiny.

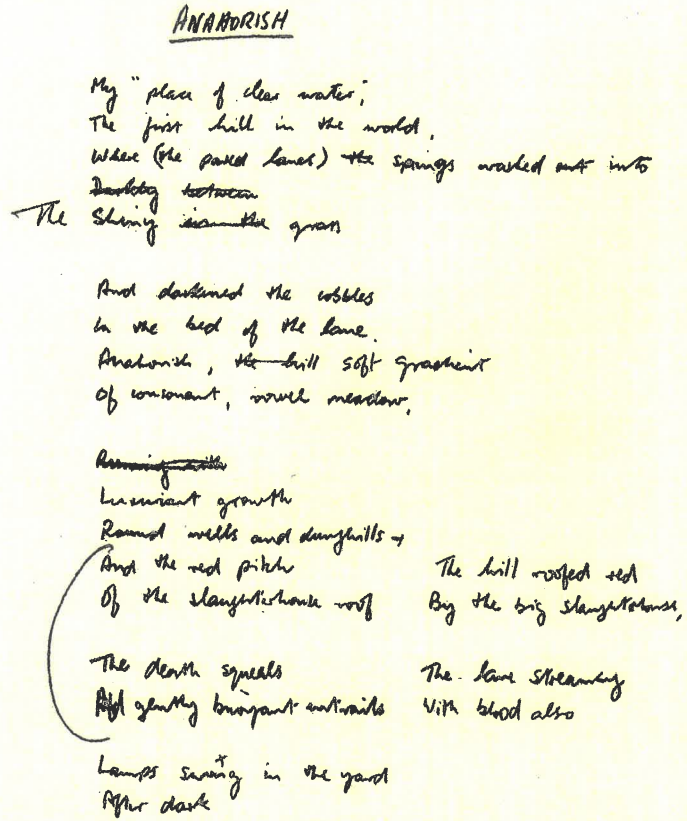
Which thrills my lyrical heart, and yet is not tough enough; there is too much Yeatsian image and cadence.

Props for a Proposition
New Poetry reviewed
Death Of A Naturalist by Seamus Heaney (Faber 18s.)
By Peter Marsh
June 19 1966

Seamus Heaney is excellent with animals and boyhood memories of life down on the farm, but DEATH OF A NATURALIST is a strangely featureless first collection. Neat and intelligent, he has a tough, packed line in natural description and can now and then pull off the strong, inventive simile. Data is piled up, the punch-lines chime in briskly, there is a general air throughout of competence and limitation; there is also something deeply mannered in his constant striving for the sharp coincidence:

Now on the bedroom wall
There is a faded patch where he has been –
As if a bandage had been ripped from skin –
Empty plaque to a house's rise and fall.

A family photograph removed from a wall, a bandage ripped from skin. It is at this glancing level that most of Heaney's figures seems to operate: poke them and you will find a literary man inside.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Under Duress
North, by Seamus Heaney (Faber, £2.95 and £1.25).
By Martin Dodsworth
June 12 1975

Seamus Heaney's North is a difficult book to review, though to write the poems it contains must have been far more difficult. Its subject-matter is the least inviting, the most taxing and the most pressing in the British Isles – Northern Island. Heaney was born, and is settled, there. He knows to the full what the fighting is about, because he has lived it all. But that kind of knowledge can be incapacitating. He puts it ironically:

The Famous
Northern reticence, the tight
Gag of place
And times: yes, yes. Of the
'we six' I sing
Where to be saved you only
must save face
And whatever you say, you
Say nothing.

The irony bites deep and hurts; the ready alternative to silence is an utterance so angry and disordered as to risk incoherence.

The major part of this book is a sequence on man's encounter with place in Ireland. As in his previous book, the poet broods on the bodies of Iron Age men recovered from the bogs, victims of a sacrificial cult we don't fully understand. The dead stand for an ever-present past, a history not to be shaken off, one that entangles colonist and colonised alike. The earth of Ireland is at once a source of goodness and strength and the house of violence, suffering and death.

These poems are strained, unhappy and overwhelming. They have to be willed into being, compiled from silence, imagined from need. They are repetitive, static, unwilling to move from their chosen themes. Phrase rests upon phrase without verb, laying the poem, weighting it down. Such a poetry, strong but defensive, self-protective and desperate, necessarily arouses equivocal feelings in the reader. What seems to me beyond dispute is that North is unequalled in our contemporary poetry as a testimony to the patience, persistence and power of the imagination under duress.

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